

6. Mahatma Gandhi's Role in Women's Empowerment

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Abstract

In the words of historian Radha Kumar - "Gandhiji got fame as the father of the Indian women's movement due to his independent views towards women and his tendency to feminize politics."
YES!

Mahatma Gandhi was certainly the father of the Indian women's movement. At the time when Gandhiji entered Indian politics, common Indian women were confined to veil and burqa. Couldn't even cross the threshold of the courtyard. Under the burden of the feudal system and patriarchal social system, it was beyond imagination for women to participate in public demonstrations, processions, and morchas. But Gandhiji performed this miracle. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari, a large number of women from the entire then India took to the streets. The courage, independence, and dynamism seen in the women associated with the freedom movement were all the contributions of Gandhiji. The present paper discusses Gandhiji's Role in women empowerment in detail.

Introduction

Gandhiji was not the first person to advocate the self-sacrificing nature of women; social reformers saw women's self-sacrifice as a forcibly imposed ritual. The revivalists thought that these rituals would make the image of Hindu women glorious. Gandhiji defined these qualities of women separately from Hindu rituals. Gandhiji said that this is a natural quality of Indian womanhood, because her important role is that of a mother. Gandhiji believed that women, having gone through the experiences of pregnancy and motherhood, were better suited to spread the message of peace and non-violence. According to Gandhiji, due to the difference in biological characteristics of men and women, they have different roles and both are equally important. The man earns and the woman takes care of the house and children. Here too Gandhiji has defined the motherly qualities



of women and the role of women separately. Gandhiji felt that women were closer to his ideology in his fight for non-violence because it involved enduring a lot of suffering and who could endure suffering in a more noble manner than men? In his eyes, it is very important to have the quality of tolerating pain. In his eyes the “voluntary widows” were ideal “activists” because they found a way to happiness in pain. In their eyes, she was the true Sati and not the one who sacrificed her life by burning herself to worry about her husband.

Due to Gandhiji's personal image being that of Mahatma, the patriotic movement started under his leadership had a mixed image of being political along with religious. His field rose above politics and became religious. Patriotism was considered a religion, the country was considered a mother goddess for which even the biggest sacrifices were worthless. Gandhiji was a full supporter of women's participation in movements. In his meetings, and in his speeches, he considered the participation of women in movements as essential and at the same time inspired them by saying that the ladies are real-life heroes, they have their own distinct roles to play and this role should be inculcated in them. They have the strength and courage to fulfill these roles. Gandhiji assured women that the movement needed their irreplaceable contribution. He said that when would women join the Satyagraha movement, only then men will also give full support to the movement. 85 percent of Indian women are immersed in the darkness of poverty and ignorance. He told the women leaders that they should work to make laws for social reform, women's education, and women's rights, so that they can get basic rights. He said that women leaders should be sattvic, strong, and controlled like Sita, Draupadi, and Damayanti, only then he will be able to awaken within women the feeling of equality with men and will be able to make them aware of their rights and awaken them to freedom. According to Gandhiji, equality never meant that women should do all the work that men do. In Gandhiji's ideal world, men and women had different areas of work according to their nature and capabilities.

Gandhiji gave ‘space’ (an independent place in public/personal life) to women. We see that in 1915, Gandhi, along with Kasturba, established the Sabarmati Ashram, in which a large number of men and women participated, he was initially associated with the local movements which included the Champaran Satyagraha of 1917, the Lagan Pay Kheda in 1918. Involvement in movements like Satyagraha and strike in the textile mills of Ahmedabad in 1917 itself as a result

of non-payment of plague bonus to the workers by the mill owners. A group of workers remained working with Kasturba in Champaran. Schools and ashrams were opened in different villages in which women were given training for reading, writing, and spinning yarn. We saw that Gandhiji always gave space to his wife in political life. Be it Sabarmati Ashram or Sevagram, Wardha Ashram, “Ba-Kuti” was separate. Where his wife freely met many women and maintained an independent social and political identity.

Gandhiji was invited by Anasuya Sarabhai to lead the textile mill strike in Ahmedabad. Her family owned several textile mills. She donated generously to the Sabarmati Ashram. Anasuya became a Gandhian. She worked among the mill workers and opened night schools for them. Although Anasuya was wealthy and had a privileged life, she still had the credit of being the first woman to work among the labourers.

In a true sense, women's participation in the national movement under the leadership of Gandhiji started after the enactment of the Rowlatt Act in 1919. The purpose of this act, known as the Seditious Meetings Act, was to impose restrictions on civil liberties. Under this Act, if any person was found possessing any anti-government material (written or published), the person would be sent to jail without any trial. By waging a struggle against this law, Gandhiji emerged as an all-India leader. Addressing a meeting of women of all communities on 6 April 1919, the day of the “All India Strike”, Gandhiji urged women to join the Satyagraha movement so as to encourage their full participation. Within a week the Jallianwala Bagh incident took place. Gandhiji withdrew from the movement, but by then it was clear that women had joined the struggle against the British. Gandhiji urged women to boycott foreign goods, take the Swadeshi oath and spin yarn daily. He explained how India's poverty increases by ignoring indigenous handicrafts and buying foreign goods. He said that the restoration of *Ramrajya* will be possible only when Indian women, brave and trustworthy like Sita, join the Indian men engaged in the struggle against immoral rulers. Will prepare and give. He also urged Muslim women spin the charkha and encourage their husbands to join the movement. Describing the British rule as the “rule of the devil” he encouraged Muslim women to boycott foreign clothes to save Islam.

Between 1910-1920, women's rights and equality began to be discussed in the national movement. Men were saying that women would be given equal rights within some time. Women started

questioning him. The women who went to the Non-Cooperation Movement 1920 meeting in Jalandhar to protest against the Rowlatt Act had openly declared that if even one woman was arrested, all of them would go to jail.

During the non-cooperation movement in the Indian freedom movement, the women's movement truly progressed under the leadership of Gandhiji. Gandhiji's voice reached remote villages and women abandoned the veil overnight for the country's independence. Inspired by patriotism, thousands of women left all obstacles behind and jumped into the fight for the freedom movement. Hundreds of women would promote Khadi and Charkha in the streets. In processions, they would sing songs ridiculing "fashion" and burn foreign clothes. However Lala Lajpat Rai was not in favor of women going to jail, and Congress was not able to decide whether women should be allowed to be arrested or not. There was a difference of opinion regarding this in Punjab under the Congress leadership. That's why they didn't go to protest at liquor shops or get themselves arrested.

But the atmosphere was different in Mumbai and Kolkata. There, women were protesting at liquor shops and protesting against the auction of liquor in the Town Hall. On 13 April, the first anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the women of Mumbai established "Rashtriya Stree Sabha". This organization was completely dedicated to national activities and was the first women's organization of its kind. This organization promoted Khadi. In November 1921, this organization organized a massive strike in Mumbai to protest against the visit of the Prince of Wales to India.

In Bengal, the members of the women's organization board of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee established "Mahila Karma Samaj". This organization works to promote creative work among the women of Bengal. Branches of the organization were opened in all areas of Kolkata. Women donated their jewelry at the meetings of the organization and got themselves registered as volunteers. In a meeting in Guwahati, Assam, sixty women got their names registered in the list of volunteers. They went to every section of society with the message against wearing and selling foreign clothes.

In Lucknow, women were urged to wear Khadi and were told to inspire men to join the national movement. A committee was formed under the chairmanship of Mrs. Abdul Qadir to work among



women. In North India, women from Allahabad, Lucknow, Delhi, and Lahore started participating in public demonstrations and processions. The public, who had never before seen women from good families coming out in the streets without a veil, burqa, or purdah, was astonished by this change and enthusiasm.

Lado Rani Zutshi, wife of Motilal Nehru's nephew, and her three daughters Manmohini, Shyama, and Jhanak led the movement in Lahore. In 1929, Manmohini was elected President of the Lahore Students Union. She was the first woman to hold this post. Manmohini welcomed Subhash Chandra Bose to preside over the Second All India Punjab Students Conference. When Bhagat Singh and his comrades were sentenced to death, Manmohini planned to stage a protest at three different locations, viz. Government College, Law College, and Farm Department College. All the students whether male or female participated in these protests. In this, 16 female students and 35 male students were arrested. Manmohini was jailed for six months.

In the 1921 Congress session, 144 women delegates, 131 women volunteers, and 14 women were part of various committees. Women took part in 'Jhanda Satyagraha' in Nagpur against the British ban on hoisting the tricolor in some areas of the city. Women also participated in the Borsad Satyagraha in 1923–24 in protest against the "punishment tax" imposed by the government on villagers to meet the expenses of a police corps formed against dacoits. Bhaktiben Desai led the procession against the government order in Nagpur. Women were also very active in the "Pullari Satyagraha" led by Kanneganti Hanumanthu in protest against the tax imposed on cattle. A huge protest movement took place in Guntur under the leadership of Unnava Lakshmibayamma. The situation became very worrying when 'Swaraj' was claimed in many villages. On 26 February 1922, when a police team tied up 50 goats and 120 buffaloes that had gone to graze grass on the charge of breaking the forest law, a mob of two to three hundred villagers attacked the police on the outskirts of Minchalapadu. In response, the police opened fire and Hanumantu died. 29 men and 9 women were arrested in this incident.

Amidst these circumstances, the Kakinada Congress Mahasabha was organized in 1923. Hundreds of women worked as volunteers. 15-year-old Durga Bai recruited many volunteers, but being

young herself, she could not become a volunteer. Women left their homes, villages, and families and joined the movement. Mahila Congress Committee was formed in January 1922. Subbamma, the convener of this committee, was the first patriotic woman who was sentenced to one year of rigorous imprisonment. On the request of Congress to donate, the women of Andhra donated their jewellery. Women established Khadi centers in the Nellore district. When Gandhiji was arrested, Unnava Lakshmiyamma resigned from the Guntur District Board in protest.

The first batch of volunteers, including Chittaranjan Das's son, were arrested for selling Khaddar on the streets in Bengal. At that time, Chittaranjan Das's wife, Basanti Devi, sister Urmila Devi, and niece Sunita Devi held strong positions in women's organizations. Sunita Devi had built a residence for employed women - "Nari Karma Mandir". All of them stepped onto the streets and were arrested. The news of the arrest spread like wildfire. More than a thousand men surrendered. As soon as the news spread, a huge crowd of Marwaris, Muslims, Sikhs, porters, students, and laborers gathered, due to which the women were freed. The next day, on 8 December 1921, the entire city came out in protest. Hundreds of students were arrested while marching on the streets wearing Khaddar, and 170 protesters were arrested in one day. Women of the Das family staged a protest in front of the shops and sold khadi.

In "Young India", Gandhi wrote- "Like the brave women of Bengal, the women of other provinces of India should also come forward." At the All India Women's Conference in Ahmedabad, after listening to the speech of All India Khilafat Committee leader Shaukat Ali and Bi Amma, the mother of Mohammed Ali, 6,000 women gathered. They urged the women to enroll their names in the Congress volunteer list and if the male members of their family are arrested, then they should start a protest and keep the flag high.

On Gandhiji's call, women from all the provinces of British-ruled India came forward. Gandhiji told women to boycott foreign clothes, spin and weave khadi themselves, and disrespect British laws. From the return of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922 to 1928, when he returned as leader Gandhiji remained engaged in reconstructive work. He kept encouraging women for creative work, he explained to them that they should consider Sita as an ideal and that the problems of Indian women could be solved by spinning yarn and weaving Khadi. He asked the women to

look and understand the conditions of poor and rural women and understand how to work efficiently. But Gandhiji cautioned women not to neglect their families because of this struggle.

All India Women's Conference and Gandhiji

Addressing women in the last days of the 1920s, Gandhiji said - "Come down from the heights of Western civilization to the plains of India, because this question is about India's independence, women's freedom, the end of untouchability and the economic development of the common people.. Connect yourself with the villages, instead of improving rural life, reconstruct it"(Kishwar, 1985).

All India Women's Conference was established in 1926. They declared that its main activities would be on issues related to social welfare. In the initial phase, some of its presidents became queens, but in 1930 its members realized that such presidents were just decorative statues for show and since AIWC is an organization of active workers, its president should also be an active worker. In 1931, Sarojini Naidu was elected as President of the Council. In its eighteenth session held in 1931, the Council gave up its guise of a non-political organization because it felt that for the freedom of the women of the country, freedom of the country was necessary. In the mid-1930s, committees related to labor, rural reconstruction, indigenous, industry, textbook, opium, and Sharda law were included in the list of sub-committees of the Council. In 1931, the organization celebrated its first 'Women's Day' in Lahore. Later on, AIWC also published a magazine named "Roshni" in 1938. Putting in all the energy, the organization did two important tasks - firstly, promotion of women's welfare issues, and secondly, extensive research work to collect authoritative data about the status of women in India.

The organization's attention was also drawn to the legal disabilities of women and it expanded the activities to improve in this direction and also associated themselves with Gandhiji's programs of reconstruction and social activism. AIWC also started training women for this so that they could explain their problems to the public representatives. The organization also started educating Women voters.

To increase the participation of women from the rural and urban lower class in the organization, the membership fee was dropped to four anaas, so that financially struggling women could join

the organization. During the war, provincial branches took up local issues, supported the farmers' protest, educated the untouchables, and encouraged their political affiliation. Although it was a non-political organization, all the women who led it were associated with Gandhiji.

All India Women's Conference, Gandhiji and Muslim Women

Sarojini Naidu was the strongest campaigner of Hindu-Muslim unity in the Congress.

Furthermore, the unity of both was very strong at that time, yet she used her speeches to make it a memorable moment of women's participation in Hindu-Muslim unity.

Sarojini Naidu raised the issues for many Muslim women. In 1929, Qudsia married Nawab Syed Aijaz Rasool, who opposed purdah practices. She also abandoned the purdah and started reforms against the practice of purdah. In 1936 she decided to contest the elections for the United Province Legislative Council on a general(Muslim) seat. The Ulemas issued a legal decree (fatwa) but Qudasia Begum won with an absolute majority, which proved that the Muslim community is not so orthodox. She had to face a lot of criticism when she spoke in favour of birth control in the Legislative Council and demanded women police officers. Many Muslim women were staunch supporters of Gandhiji.

The rise of Muslim communalism was blurring the lines between Indian nationalism and Hindu communalism. As a result of the failure of the Congress leadership to establish a proper secular ideal, Muslims started organizing as a separate Muslim community.

Civil Disobedience Movement-1930-35

A large number of women entered civil life through the Civil Disobedience Movement. Between 1930–32, women in Mumbai participated in more strikes and demonstrations than in any other province. Thousands of women started marching in processions. In 1930, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyay was in-charge of the women's organization under the Hindustani Seva Dal. She used to organize camps for the training of women workers and the level of training of girls was different. In which, along with sewing-weaving, and organizing meetings, it also included courses in Indian history and geography. Under the supervision of the members of Satyagraha Ashram and Khurshedhen, a class was started to train women to participate in the Satyagraha campaign to break

the salt law. These women were given training in singing campaign songs, organizing village meetings, maintaining peace in the meetings, maintaining law and order, maintaining cleanliness, first aid to the injured, service security and spinning yarn.

Congress started Forest Satyagraha in Central Province in 1930 which spread to Nagpur and Jabalpur. In which, many tribal women along with their children, participate and provide some kind of support to the police and forest officials.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-31), about twenty thousand women went to jail. Statistics show that out of every six people, one was a woman who went to jail." (Mukherjee, 1989). Gandhiji worked to give women a respectable place and lead them on the path of progress. After the arrest of Gandhiji, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay etc. took over the leadership and increased self-confidence among women. When the male leaders were imprisoned, these women continued the movement, which has been interestingly described by Jawahar Lal Nehru – "At the beginning of April 1930, civil disobedience and atrocities by the government were prevalent in the entire country and I again reached the jail. Almost all of us men were in jail. At that time a strange thing happened, our women came into the field and continued the movement. Earlier Women were equally present, but this time they joined the movement massively, that is a surprise for not only the British government but their men also. These were the women of the upper or middle class who had been living inside their homes, farmer women, working-class women and those poor women, who in lakhs did not care about the orders of the government and the baton of the police (Nehru, 1989(centenary edition) .Gandhiji appreciated the role of women in the civil disobedience movement of the mid-1930s. He said, "Indian women tore the veil and threw it away and came out to serve the nation. They felt that the country was demanding of them something more than the responsibility of taking care of the household."(Gandhi ,1947).

Salt Satyagraha (Dandi March) 1930

In March 1930, Gandhiji started a 240-mile journey from Ahmedabad to Dandi as part of the Civil Disobedience Movement to break the British monopoly on salt production. Nationalist women were saddened by the fact that no woman was included in the seven companions that Gandhiji chose for the Dandi March. He was requested to include **women** in the journey, but Gandhiji

rejected this request. Margaret's sisters in the magazine 'Stree Dharma' opposed this decision of Gandhi. Khurshedben Naoroji wrote a letter to Gandhiji. But Gandhiji remained firm on his decision, by saying that he had arranged for far greater responsibility for them. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay requested Gandhiji and finally got permission to join the March.

Groups were formed to organize Satyagraha .The leaders also included women like Sarojini Naidu, Lado Rani Zutshi , Kamla Nehru, Hansa Mehta, Avantikabai Gokhale, Durgabai Deshmukh and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay etc. Thousands of women across the country started making and selling salt. This is generally remembered as the first time the Indian women masses got involved in the Indian freedom struggle. Sarojini Naidu was the first woman to be arrested in Salt Satyagraha. Inspired by her, the women of Andhra started making salt in many districts. They were assaulted with lathi-charge and arrested.

To involve women in all these activities, to speed up the programs and to provide coordination, separate organizations like Mahila Dharna Board, Stree Swaraj Sangh, Swayamsevak Sangh etc. were formed. Their work included processions, dharnas,, spinning, selling khadi, spreading awareness etc.

Such women participated in the Salt Satyagraha who had never even stepped outside the house before. They had to gather courage before taking to the streets. They had to practice walking long distances and had to get to standing in the sun for long periods. They learned many tasks like protesting in front of foreign clothes and liquor shops, reaching dangerous places and carrying out service work or rescue work, removing stones and pipes and removing obstructions from the roads.

Apart from these trained patriots, thousands of ordinary women used to give arrests, participate in processions, salute the tricolor in flag hoisting programmes, serve as nurses in hospitals, cook food and sell khadi. Many of these women gave up their comfortable lifestyle, regardless of the heat or cold, they got arrested, staged dharnas at shops and travelled from city to city for necessary publicity work. Within three years of the movement, five thousand women had to endure harsh imprisonment, faced lathicharge, suffered loss of property, fell ill and lost their jobs and livelihoods.

According to police reports, thousands of women would attend the meetings. Gandhiji was creating a new set of ideals for Indian women, so that their shortcomings like passivity and self-abuse would be overcome and transformed into strength. In the beginning of the 19th century, the British had used the deteriorating social condition of Indian women as an excuse to justify their laws, but the participation of women in the national freedom struggle proved this wrong.

Thousands of women across the country joined the Quit India Movement. They went underground, ran parallel governments, and were active in illegal activities and during all this many women were martyred. On 8 August 1942, the movement started under the leadership of Gandhiji at Gowalia Tank Ground in Mumbai with the proclamation of "Do or Die" and "British Quit India". Aruna Asaf Ali hoisted the tricolor. Although the first-line leaders of the movement, Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, etc. were sent to jail in the beginning, but Aruna, Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalani, Usha Mehta, etc. stayed underground and took the movement forward.

Women took part in strikes in cities, from cutting railways, posts, wires to hoisting the tricolor in courts. When protests began to be suppressed, women began participating in underground movements. When the movement spread towards the villages, a large number of farm women raised their voices against land taxes and, the rights of farm laborers and landowners. During the Quit India Movement, thousands of women were sent to jail, hundreds were raped and other atrocities took place in places like Midnapore, Korapur, Azamgarh, Satara. Usha Mehta from Mumbai, Maharashtra left studies and started protesting in front of liquor and foreign clothes shops and participated in processions and rallies. With the help of her friends, she set up a secret radio station. When all the media were banned, she narrated Gandhiji's speech on "Do or Die" through radio, reported the brutal atrocities on women, and the arrests of Swadeshi agitators during their processions and demonstrations. She was arrested in November and was jailed. Women associated with the parallel government (Patri Sarkar) of Satara were arrested in 1942. In 1944, they escaped from Poona jail and continued leading the underground movement of Satara till 1946. Indumati of Nashik was sentenced to 7 years of rigorous imprisonment for leading the underground movement. On August 19, 1942, two hundred British soldiers and fifty Indian constables reached Wardha,



Sevagram by a special train and brutally tortured the people. Looted properties, raped women, sparing not even pregnant and child-bearing women or even young girls.

By this period, the women's movement had completely transformed into a freedom struggle and the issue of women's liberation was seen to be linked with India's independence. No questions were raised on women activists during this era. But Gandhiji indeed took the women out of the indulgent form, those women who used to do only household chores like sweeping, mopping, cleaning utensils, taking care of children and old people and thought this was the only purpose of their lives, Gandhiji made them realize that they are something, they also exist. As Neera Desai wrote about the impact of the independence movement on Indian women – “The women of India realized for the first time that their lives were not useless or aimless. The duty of a woman is not only to keep her husband happy but also to fulfill other responsibilities of life. The thought of sacrificing for the progress of the nation easily helps in ending the practice of purdah. And it creates fearlessness and self-confidence in women... Till now men used to lead the women's movement, instead of that women have started conducting their work independently and independently(Desai and Thakkar, 2001).

On Gandhiji's call, a large number of women and students from every corner of the country took part in the fight against colonialism. These female students had to face many problems as political activists. These problems included personal and family constraints as well as social constraints, but these problems were deliberately kept a 'single issue' campaign as part of their broader struggle against the British government.

The aim was to raise the question of domestic labor, the manufacturing process, capital, and the family and relate them to women's problems such as women's employment, working conditions and family oppression, the issue of widespread exploitation of women, and the need for revolutionary change.

Lakhs of women and students took to the streets in the Gandhian movement. Took part in morcha, demonstration, dharna, protesting, prabhatpheri, faced lathi-charge and bullets. Many pregnant women went to jail, many were jailed along with young children, many were killed in police encounters, many served jail sentences for years, and many stayed awake all night making posters,



leaving their children behind. They jumped into the movement along with men, but when it came to equality with men, women were suppressed under patriarchy.

In the words of Radha Kumar, "Gandhiji's most important contribution was that he justified women's participation in public activities and expanded it so that they could break the cultural barriers and move forward. At the same time, Gandhiji's definition of the nature and role of women appeared to be deeply linked to Hindu patriarchy and he often tended to limit the women's movement rather than advance it." (Kumar, 2011).

Gandhiji never said anything clearly about the economic independence of women. Women were not seen as workers in Khadi-related activities. There was no image of a modern self-reliant woman earning an independent livelihood in Gandhiji's concept of an ideal woman. According to him, a woman is the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering and her job in public life is to put a stop to men's unhindered ambition and property acquisition. Spinning yarn and weaving clothes is a religious act for her. By incorporating patriotism into religion, the politicization of women fell right into the traditional cultural framework. Emphasis was laid on maintaining Indian religion and tradition in the language and roots of the movement. Women were being reminded again and again that they had to protect Indian culture from Western culture. This is where we see a contradiction. It was because of these traditional roots of the movement that thousands of women could participate in the movement but could not do anything different from tradition in their personal and public life. The contribution of women to the history of the fight against colonialism is merely an extension of their traditional role. There is no independent existence of women anywhere in the national movement. But due to Gandhiji's Influence and encouragement, women realized their potential and played an important role in freedom struggle where the issue of women's liberation was seen to be linked with India's independence.



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